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ABSTRACT

The current trend in adult nonfiction is to incorporate greater and greater amounts of fiction into what is marketed as nonfiction. This trend is mirrored in today's nonfiction for children. Sometimes fictional characters are introduced and their stories are meant to serve as a vehicle for keeping the young reader's interest; sometimes stretches of undocumented dialogue are included; sometimes liberties are taken with chronology. An idea that frequently emerges during discussions of fictionalizing is that fiction somehow provides a "higher truth" that can only be achieved when writers are not constrained by facts. A different way of seeing the changes in nonfiction is as a catalyst, as a means of deepening a reader's understanding of information. Even when telling the truth, authors can use storytelling notions. Rhoda Blumberg's "What's the Deal? Jefferson, Napoleon, and the Louisiana Purchase" (1998) taps the reader's understanding of the well formed story by providing five scenarios which could have happened but did not, and similarly, in "Joan of Arc" (1998), Diane Stanley uses the power of story to ask readers to imagine what it was like living during the Hundred Years' War. In evaluating the changes in nonfiction for children it has to be determined whether intermingling fact and fiction is a catalyst or a catastrophe. (Cites 5 children's books and contains 16 references.) (NKA)

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Intermingling Fact and Fiction: Catalyst or Catastrophe?

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Intermingling Fact and Fiction: Catalyst or Catastrophe?

I want to share three stories with you. Each of these stories appeared in *The New York Times* during the past year, and each illustrates the current trend in adult nonfiction to incorporate greater and greater amounts of fiction into what is marketed as nonfiction. It is this trend—an intermingling of fact and fiction—that is mirrored in today's nonfiction for children.

Story #1

In an article that appeared in *The Times* last February, entitled "Now! Read the True (More or Less) Story!" (Carvajal, 1998), it was reported that John Berendt, author of the best selling nonfiction title *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* had not only created dialogue attributed to real life people, he invented scenes within the story itself. According to Berendt, "I call it rounding the corners to make a better narrative…This is not hard-nosed reporting because clearly I made it up" (E1). Defending this approach, he stated, "The truth that I was telling was the actual story, and I do not think that I distorted the truth by cutting these corners….It was entertainment; it was show biz…They're getting the same story, and they're getting it better" (E4).

Not everyone agrees. Nonfiction writer H.G. Bissinger put it this way: "Maybe I'm old-fashioned, but what makes nonfiction great is that a reader is getting something based on the truth." He said he "felt 'robbed' by the fictional smoothing of *Midnight*."

Story #2

In an article entitled "Nobel Winner Finds Her Story Challenged" (Rohter, 1998), it was disclosed that the autobiography of Rigoberta Menchu, the Guatemalan Nobel laureate and spokesperson for the rights of indigenous peoples is largely untrue.

The reporter states, "Key details of that story…are untrue, according to a new book written by an American anthropologist….Based on nearly a decade of interviews with more than 120 people and archival research, the anthropologist, David Stoll, concludes that Ms. Menchu's book 'cannot be the eyewitness account it purports to be' because the Nobel laureate repeatedly describes 'experiences she never had herself.'"

What exactly was untrue? According to neighbors, relatives, and friends, and several Roman Catholic nuns, "many of the main episodes related by Ms. Menchu have

either been fabricated or seriously exaggerated....The land dispute central to the book was a long and bitter family feud that pitted her father against his in-laws, and not a battle against wealthy landowners of European descent....A younger brother whom Ms. Menchu says she saw die of starvation never existed...Contrary to Ms. Menchu's assertion in the first page of her book that 'I never went to school' ...she in fact received the equivalent of a middle-school education as a scholarship student...."

Several days later a *Times* editorial commented that "Ms. Menchu has clearly chosen what might generously be called 'representative' truth, where the sufferings of a people are conflated in the tale of an individual life. Her achievement has been diminished because she altered the truth....Testimony is the people's history, but it is only as powerful as it is true" ("Blunting the Hard Edge of Truth," 1998, p. A 32).

Story #3

In a series of articles that appeared in June of last year, readers of *The Times* learned about journalists either fictionalizing the news or attempting to respond to this tendency. A June 12 article reported that 25-year-old Stephen Glass made up part or all of more than 25 articles of the 41 he wrote for *The New Republic* (Pogrebin, 1998a). According to *The Times*, "Mr. Glass had completely fabricated six articles and had manufactured material in parts of 21 other articles."

Exactly one week later *The Times* reported that Boston Globe columnist Patricia Smith had "fabricated people and quotations in four of her columns....In one case, she made up nearly an entire column about a woman dying of cancer, the newspaper said" (Pogrebin, 1998b). Smith is quoted as making the following statement: "From time to time in my metro column, to create the desired impact or to slam home a salient point, I attributed quotes to people who didn't exist ..."

And while these revelations are startling and disturbing, an equally startling and disturbing article followed them. In a feature dealing with a new magazine *Brill's Content* designed to monitor the news media, editor Steven Brill revealed that "many journalists said that any effort to look into their sources and dissect a humanly flawed process made them profoundly uncomfortable" (Firestone, 1998, p. A7)." Jackie Judd, an ABC News

reporter termed it "peculiar," "inappropriate," and "off limits." "We don't do it," she is reported to have said.

These stories direct our attention to a larger phenomenon that is not restricted to adult books. Intermingling fact and fiction is also becoming increasingly prevalent in children's books. Commenting on the practice of fictionalizing informational books for children, children's book critics Miriam Martinez and Marcia Nash wrote in the *Journal of Children's Literature* that "fictionalizing has become a *stylistic option* increasingly used by authors of informational books" (italics mine) (1998, p. 12). Fictionalizing has even spurred a vocabulary of its own. Among the terms I have encountered to describe it are *fictional nonfiction, nonfiction novels, faction,* and my all time favorite—*fictional facts.*

A Trend Mirrored in Children's Literature

Within children's nonfiction, fictionalizing takes a number of forms. Sometimes fictional characters are introduced and their stories are meant to serve as a vehicle for keeping the young reader's interest. Sometimes stretches of undocumented dialogue are included. Sometimes liberties are taken with chronology. Whatever the technique, critics need to consider the effects of fictionalizing. A few examples taken from recent children's books will set the stage for this discussion.

Crossing the Delaware: A History in Many Voices (Peacock, 1998) does provide multiple perspectives, but only a handful of them are authentic. This brief picture book describes how, during the American Revolutionary War, General Washington and his poorly clad troops crossed the Delaware and attacked the Hessian troops in Trenton. As the title suggests, the story is told in *many voices*. However, only a handful of them are authentic. One of the voices belongs to the author who recently visited the site; another to a fictional correspondent who is one of Washington's soldiers; and a handful of others who were actual observers—army officers, an informer to the British, Thomas Paine, and more. And, while each voice is presented in a different font, only a small note from the editor on the verso of the half-title page tells the reader how to understand this book. Here, in small print likely to be overlooked, the reader learns that the book is a mix of

fiction and nonfiction and that the soldier whose letters appear throughout is a fictional creation.

This book presents *many voices*, but they are clearly disjointed in time. The author herself takes a modern day perspective on the past. "I wonder how they felt when they marched down the road through the darkness, carrying guns that might not even shoot?" (p. 30), she asks. Harry, the fictional soldier, also sounds remarkably modern. Commenting on the freezing December march towards Trenton, he notes, "A Fellow could freeze on the side of the road on a night like this" (p. 31). Only the real soldier, Private Greenwood, gives a real sense of the surprise raid. He writes, "When we were all ready we advanced and, although there was not more than one bayonet to five men, orders were given to 'Charge bayonets and rush on!' and rush on we did" (p. 31). Surprisingly, the authentic description is also the shortest one offered.

A second title, *Kennedy Assassinated!* (Hampton, 1997), an emotional and gripping retelling of this terrible event in history from the perspective of an on-the-spot reporter, contains long stretches of dialogue. Are we to believe that the author remembered these words that were uttered in 1963 so that they could be accurately transcribed more than thirty years later? Or, are we getting the flavor of the event when rookie reporter Bill Hampton calls the dispatcher of the Dallas Police Department in order to find out where President Kennedy's motorcade is heading. Here's a sampling of the conversation:

> "Bill Hampton of U.P.I. What can you tell me about the shots fired at the President's motorcade?" I asked, again trying to sound authoritative.
>
> "The President has been hit," he said, matter-of-factly. "They are taking him to Parkland Hospital."
>
> "How serious is it?"
>
> "I don't know. I just got off the phone with a motorcycle officer right next to the limousine. He said there was blood in the back of the car. Governor Connally was also wounded. They are on their way to Parkland. ...We really don't know any more," the dispatcher said. "I've got to clear the line." (pp. 25-26)

In *Ghosts of the White House* (Harness,1998), chronology is turned topsy-turvy when a young girl visiting the White House is pulled into one of the paintings and taken

on a personal tour by none other than George Washington himself. Here she learns from Washington about things in that occurred after his death:

> Mr. Adams moved in on the first day of November 1800, when the capital was moved here from Philadelphia. He was the second president, but the first to live here. *I was dead by then*, but I could see my friend on those cold winter nights, writing letters, wearing a cap to keep his old bald head warm. [italics added] (unpaged)

Further on in the text, there are more meetings of non-contemporaries: Ulysses S. Grant and Dwight D. Eisenhower, Millard Fillmore and Richard Nixon, Abe Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt. All of this is possible because the presidents are ghosts!

There are brief biographical sketches of each president, but these sketches are literally on the sidelines. For example, regarding FDR we learn some straightforward information in a sidebar:

> People lost their jobs, money, farms, homes, businesses, and, worst of all confidence. The Great Depression was scary! A week after his inauguration in 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt began his radio talks to explain to the people his "New Deal" programs such as Social Security and the Works Progress Administration (WPA), designed to get government jobs and money to the people. Americans loved him or hated him for how he changed the government.... (unpaged)

This straightforward informational text occurs on the same page as a fictional chat between F.D.R. and Washington in which F.D.R. tells the first president:

> When I sat here and spoke my "fireside chats" into the microphones, I could talk to all Americans on the radio, General Washington. I could encourage the people, tell them what I was doing and why. Just think if you had been able to *do* that when the war with King George was going badly. (unpaged)

This small sampling this small sampling only hints at the larger trend in fictionalization. In fact, Martinez and Nash (1998) emphasize that authors are continuing to experiment with a variety of ways and that informational books are evolving. Some authors intersperse fictional and nonfictional chapters. Some authors create composites, combining events taken from several settings and presenting them as happening in one setting. This sampling gives you a flavor of the intermingling of fact and fiction and provides a basis for discussing this trend.

Catalyst or Catastrophe?

Should fictionalizing be viewed as an innovation? Should it be encouraged? Is it good to think with? Does fictionalizing support comprehension of information? Is it more than infotainment?

An idea that frequently emerges during discussions of fictionalizing is that fiction somehow provides us with a "higher truth" that can only be achieved when writers are not constrained by facts. This has been referred to as "a creative truth" as opposed to "a historical truth" (Marc Norman quoted in Sterngold, 1998, B9), or being "truthful rather than factual" (Joseph Mitchell quoted in Yagoda, 1998, p. 6). But what does this mean? Is this the seamless story that seems so satisfying and so marketable? Is this history without boredom?

Or is it simply anti-intellectual? For a long time educators assumed that narrative was primary and that children later came to understand informational text. It has also been suggested that fictionalized texts are needed "to engage student interest" (Leal, 1995, p. 199). Yet there is an ever growing body of evidence showing us that this is not so. A recent article in *Language Arts* described how for some children—and in this case, for children having difficulty learning to read—nonfiction is a "way in" to literacy, a way that capitalizes on children's background knowledge and genuine interests. But this will only occur if we see knowledge-seeking as motivational (Alexander1997), as answering our deepest needs to know, and not as the step-sister of aesthetic response.

Let me offer a different way of seeing the changes in nonfiction as a catalyst, as a means of deepening a reader's understanding of information. It involves adapting storytelling and fictional techniques within the confines of truth-telling. In a recent commentary entitled "On Telling the Truth" (1998) Russell Freedman reminds us that imaginary scenes and invented dialogue, once the stock in trade of biographies for children, are no longer acceptable. Instead, he provides another route for engaging young readers: "Nowadays, a nonfiction children's book demands unwavering focus and the

most artful use of language and storytelling techniques" (p. 225). But these techniques are secondary to the need to tell the truth:

> "...Writers can only interpret the truth as they hear it. They are answerable in that interpretation to their readers, with whom they have an unwritten but clearly understood pact to be as factually accurate as human frailty will allow" (p. 225).

Two recent "innovations" will show that even when telling the truth, authors can tap storytelling notions. In Rhoda Blumberg's *What's the Deal? Jefferson, Napoleon, and the Louisiana Purchase* (1998), the author taps our understanding of the well formed story but telling us that:

> The Louisiana Purchase was not inevitable.
> The history of north America would have been different had Napoleon decided to keep Louisiana.
> There could have been other outcomes. (p. 116)

She then provides five other scenarios which could have happened, but didn't. For example, instead of selling, Napoleon could have tried to build up Louisiana into a powerful French colony, one that could challenge its neighbors and possibly invade the United States. This not only shows that history involves decision making, it also taps a tradition among historians of pursuing counter-factual or how-it-might-have-been history. It is within disciplinary inquiry.

Similarly, Diane Stanley in *Joan of Arc* (1998) uses the power of story to ask readers to imagine what it was like living during the Hundred Years' War.

> Imagine your country is at war. The fighting is not at some faraway place but right where you live. From time to time, soldiers march into your town, killing people and taking whatever they want. They might burn your house or even the whole town. There's not enough food to eat, because the enemy has taken or destroyed the crops. But you're used to it, because you have never known what it is like to live in peace. (unpaged)

This is a sophisticated version of once-upon-a-time; it is a version that invites empathy and promotes historical understanding.

At the end of *Joan of Arc*, Stanley reminds readers that history is not a seamless story. She invites readers to think of possible interpretations of the events—possible

endings. She writes, "But now that we have the story, what are we to make of it?" (unpaged). She provides three possible interpretations—that Joan's revelations were divine or that they were hallucinations or that they were wish fulfillment. She concludes that "sometimes, in studying history, we have to accept what we know and let the rest remain a mystery" (unpaged). Here Stanley not only highlights the gaps in the actual story, she opens the door for the reader to join the debate.

The story-based innovations of Rhoda Blumberg and Diane Stanley do serve as catalysts for nonfiction and they do it within the framework of truth-telling. When reading their books, the reader is not "grazing among frilly anecdotes" (Frankel, 1998a, p. 18) that are only marginally related to the big idea, nor enjoying a fanciful story with "a luster of fact" (Frankel, 1998b, p. 32).

Nonfiction literature for children is changing. It is incorporating many visual aspects from technology. It is delving into topics previous left untouched or topics new to begin with. It reasonable, then to expect the telling of information to change as well, and it is changing. But in evaluating these changes we would do well to ask ourselves two questions:

- What is an artist's responsibility to his or her material? (Kimmelman, 1999)
- Is it acceptable to seize the label of nonfiction while rejecting its truth-telling mandate?

As we apply these questions to the innovations in nonfiction for children, we will be better able to determine whether intermingling fact and fiction is a catalyst or a catastrophe.

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